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ABSTRACT

Certain easy-to-teach and relatively low-risk counseling exercises and techniques have been found to be effective in reducing test anxiety. Test anxiety is considered a "normal developmental difficulty" and is generally encountered as an academic difficulty rather than a personal one. A brief, convenient psychoeducational group format is cost-effective and appropriate for working with students to overcome this problem. This manual outlines a group process in which the counselor leads a structured group of students who suffer from severe test anxiety. The process is not intended for students whose primary academic challenge is procrastination. The design of this group calls for four group sessions; the counselor will meet individually with each student at the beginning and end of the group. The four sessions are based on teaching students the following: (1) basic test "wiseness" strategies; (2) techniques for systematic relaxation; (3) how to challenge self-defeating irrational thinking and to cultivate adaptive self-affirming cognitions; and (4) how to cultivate a sense of play and fun about the situation. Guidelines are given for recruiting group members, screening out inappropriate members, setting up the group, and debriefing each member. Outlines for each session are provided. An evaluation form is appended. (EMK)

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C³: The Curriculum For Test Mastery

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OVERVIEW

This manual is designed for counseling professionals who work with secondary or post-secondary school students. Specifically, it is designed to lead the counselor through a structured group designed for students who suffer from severe test anxiety. It is not intended for students whose primary academic challenge is that they procrastinate and are not prepared for the examination. Instead, it is intended for students whose difficulty is related to the testing situation and their anxiety about performing on tests.

This group design is psychoeducational rather than psychotherapeutic in nature. It is not intended for use in addressing members' personal concerns except insofar as they are specifically related to their experiences of test anxiety.

This group design requires that the group leader meet with each member a total of six times. The first time is an individual meeting for the purpose of screening and orientation of prospective members. The next four meetings consist of the group curriculum proper and will involve all of the group members. The final meeting is between the group leader and each individual member to debrief and evaluate the member's experience and success (or lack of) in reducing his/her test anxiety and to solicit feedback from members. Other individual meetings may be scheduled at the discretion of the group leader, should the need arise. However, if a member has need of personal counseling, it would be most appropriate for the purposes of this group to refer them to another counseling professional who is qualified to help them with their personal concern.

RATIONALE FOR THE GROUP DESIGN

Test anxiety is considered a "normal developmental difficulty." It is a commonly encountered academic difficulty rather than an interpersonal one (Bakunas, 1993). Thus a brief convenient psychoeducational group format is considered most expedient, cost-effective, and appropriate for working with the greatest number of students to overcome this problem. It should also be remembered that for some students, test anxiety is so severe that it interferes significantly with their ability to perform on examinations and thus causes academic underachievement. And for some students, test anxiety is so acute that it may cause physical symptoms (such as nausea, vomiting, high blood pressure, tension headaches, sleep difficulties the night before) and suffering. It behooves the counselor who works in secondary and post-secondary academic settings to be proactive in offering support and assistance for students to overcome this obstacle to achievement and source of discomfort and, in some cases, worse.

THEORIES AND TECHNIQUES EMPLOYED

Certain easy-to-teach and relatively low-risk counseling exercises and techniques have been found to be effective in reducing test anxiety. These include teaching students: (1) basic test "wiseness" strategies (adapted from College Entrance Examination Board, 1991); (2) techniques for systematic relaxation (adapted from Nicaise, 1995; Sapp, 1996); (3) how to challenge self-defeating irrational thinking and to cultivate adaptive self-affirming cognitions (from Ellis & Dryden, 1997; Nicaise, 1995; Sapp, 1996); and (4) to cultivate a sense of play and fun about the situation (Cousins, 1983; Schenk, 1995). These four approaches constitute the basis for the content of the four group sessions in this group design.

STARTING THE GROUP

Group members may need to be recruited by attraction and promotion, particularly in an adult educational setting. Therefore, the prospective group leader should be prepared to allow ample time (perhaps several months) to recruit, screen, and select appropriate members for the group.

In a high school setting, students may be recruited by announcements, by teacher referral, by advertising in the school newspaper, etc. Remember in recruiting members in a high school that your school's policy may require that you get separate parental permission to have that parent's child in your group.

In a post secondary setting, members may be attracted through fliers, announcements on the campus radio station and in the school paper, and by contacting Departments and academic advising services. However, though many may call you or be interested, they do not always show up when asked, and finding enough members for your group (recommended no less than 5 and no greater than 12) may be a lengthy process.

The group should be few in number so students can experience the greatest degree of assistance in the shortest amount of time. Also, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that having more sessions would make the group more effective. Sessions are also designed to be one hour in length, although a slightly longer session might be better, so as to conform to what is feasible in a high school setting time frame.

SCREENING

In selecting students for the group and screening out those for whom the group would not be appropriate, it is suggested that the group leader advertise, promote, and present the group to prospective members as a learning experience, a sort of brief class, rather than as a therapy experience. It is paramount to ask members during the screening interview what it is that they hope to get out of the group. Those whose needs or expectations seem to significantly exceed what the group is designed to achieve should be screened out and referred for services appropriate to their need and situation.

An orientation should be done for any member who is accepted (and can take place in this same initial screening, if appropriate) into the group. The orientation should stress that this is not a therapy group and that, during the group meetings, members should limit discussion to only those concerns which are related to their test anxiety. This statement can be included on a consent form.

At the same time, the group leader needs to remember that there are certain risks that are inherent in any group situation, and to inform members about these risks. Even in the most prosaic of group situations, interpersonal difficulties may arise and an individual group member's rights or feelings may get stepped on. Each and every prospective group member should sign a written consent form following a discussion of these risks and, if parental consent is needed, the parent should sign as well. An example of such a risk would be the inability of the leader to guarantee that all members will maintain confidentiality outside of the group about what is shared by members in group meetings.

FRAME FACTORS FOR THE GROUP

As stated above, group sessions are intended to last for one "therapeutic" hour, i.e., fifty minutes. The location for group meetings should be at the school and the setting up and operation of the group should be cleared with and supervised by the counselor's supervisor. This is so that what goes on in the group is covered as part of the counselor's job activities. In a high school setting, it is important to schedule group meetings in cooperation with the members' teachers so that , as much as possible, they are at times selected to cause the least interference with members' class attendance.

The room should be of adequate size and adequately lit and ventilated, and should be a place which can be closed off from interruptions during the group sessions. If it is necessary that students remain in their seats, then it is

particularly important to have chairs which are comfortable and movable and which do not have a desktop attached. If it were possible and appropriate to have a location where students can comfortably lay on the floor, this would be ideal for learning the relaxation techniques involved in systematic relaxation. (Remember that this is contingent on whether or not all the students in the group are physically able to get down and get up from a lying down position.) A carpeted room or a room with mats or throw pillows may suffice. It is up to the counselor to consider the maturity level of the members and/or the school's policies so as to judge whether or not have students lay down during a group session may lead to unrelated misunderstandings.

The room should be equipped with a blackboard and/or dry erase board and/or newsprint pad, markers, and easel so as to aid in instruction of points taught during group meetings.

OUTLINES FOR SESSIONS

Outlines for each of the four sessions plus details about the particulars are in Appendix I.

CONCLUDING THE GROUP

After the four group meetings, the group leader should meet with each member individually to "debrief." At this time, the leader should ask the members about his/her progress with each component of the C^3 program: test wiseness, systematic relaxation, disputing irrational beliefs and replacing them with positive self-affirmations, and cultivating several ways to inject fun into the testing situation. If, in the leader's opinion, any particular group member needs one or two more individual sessions to "fine tune" the process, the leader can of course choose to offer them at his or her discretion.

A suggested evaluation form is provided in Appendix II. These evaluations should be done by the members following the final (individual) meeting so that they feel less pressure to say "nice" things. The leader should feel free to modify this evaluation form to meet the particulars of his or her individual setting and situation. The author of this curriculum would greatly appreciate hearing from the folks who use this module about what works well and what could be changed for the better so that she may revise accordingly for future editions. In the meantime, the leader can use member feedback to modify each time he or she offers the program.

References

For information on test-taking strategies and test wiseness:

Bakunas, B. (1993). Putting the lid on test anxiety. *Learning, 22*(2), 64-65.

College Entrance Examination Board. (1991). *Student survival guide: How to work smarter, not harder.* New York: College Board Publications.

For information on cognitive restructuring techniques:

Ellis, A., & Dryden, W. (1991). *The practice of rational emotive behavior therapy .* New York: Springer Publishing Company.

Nicaise, M. (1995). Treating test anxiety: A review of three approaches. *Teacher Education and Practice, 11*(1), 65-81.

Sapp, M. (1996). Three treatments for reducing the worry and emotionality components of test anxiety with undergraduate and graduate college students: Cognitive-behavioral, relaxation therapy, and supportive counseling. *Journal of College Student Development, 37*(1), 79-87.

For information on systematic relaxation techniques:

Nicaise, M. (1995). Treating test anxiety: A review of three approaches. *Teacher Education and Practice, 11*(1), 65-81.

Sapp, M. (1996). Three treatments for reducing the worry and emotionality components of test anxiety with undergraduate and graduate college students: Cognitive-behavioral, relaxation therapy, and supportive counseling. *Journal of College Student Development, 37*(1), 79-87.

For information on how to make anxious situations fun:

Cousins, N. (1983). *The healing heart : antidotes to pain and helplessness.* New York : Norton.

Schenk, L. (1995). From casenotes of sessions taking place April 1995.

For questions or suggestions concerning the C^3 module and its contents, please contact its author: Lisa Schenk, 6-J Sails Way, Greensboro, NC 27406, (336) 271-6716.

APPENDIX I: OUTLINES FOR GROUP SESSIONS

(INCLUDING DETAILED INFORMATION ON COMPONENTS FOR EACH GROUP SESSION)

SESSION ONE

I. Introduction and welcome
II. Statement and establishment of rules of behavior during meetings
III. Icebreaker activity
IV. Round which involves low-risk self-disclosure from each member
V. Mini-lecture on test-wiseness
VI. Round in which each member is asked to react to information on test-wiseness
VII. Asking each member to pick a way during the week that he/she can practice one of the test-wiseness techniques (letting them know that they will be asked to report at the next group meeting about this)
VIII. Brief overview of material to be covered in Session Two
IX. Invitation to members to ask final questions or offer comments
X. Adjournment

Details about Session One content

- The "icebreaker" activity is just that. It should be as simple as possible, but matched to the situation and developmental level of the students in the group. For example, you would probably use a less sophisticated sort of icebreaker for ninth graders who have gone to school together since kindergarten and a class of adult education students who have never met before. An example of a simple icebreaker could be having each group member place an adjective before their first name with the same first letter as the first initial of their first name and explain why that adjective suits them. E.g., "I am Lively Lisa, because I am usually the life of the party."

- A "round" refers to a go-around, an exercise in which each member responds to the question.

- Outline for mini-lecture on test-wiseness strategies:

[PLEASE NOTE THAT IN RARE CASES OFA FEW STANDARDIZED TESTS, THE FINAL SCORE IS FIGURED AS A FUNCTION OF NUMBER OF ANSWERS RIGHT DIVIDED BY TOTAL NUMBER OF TEST QUESTIONS ANSWERED BY THE STUDENT--RATHER THAN THE TYPICAL WAY OF FIGURING FINAL SCORE AS SOME FUNCTION OF THE NUMBER OF ANSWERS RIGHT DIVIDED BY TOTAL NUMBER OF TEST QUESTIONS. IN THESE RARE CASES, THERE IS THEREFORE, IN EFFECT, A PENALTY FOR GUESSING. IN SUCH CASES, ONE'S TEST TAKING STRATEGY WILL NEED TO BE ADJUSTED ACCORDINGLY. THE STRATEGIES OFFERED BELOW ARE FOR TESTS FOR WHICH THERE IS NO PENALTY FOR GUESSING.]

1) Decide what materials you will need to take with you to be prepared. Will you need sharp Number 2 pencils? Will you need to take some tissues with you in case you need to blow your nose (when you have a cold or allergies)? In other words, walk in prepared knowing you are prepared.
2) Allow plenty of time to arrive at the testing location. It's much better to arrive early than late. In the case of certain standardized tests, such as SAT's and GRE's, it is often the case that students will not be admitted once the test begins. If you're worried about being bored or nervous while you wait, take something to do, such as a book to read.
3) Make sure that you wear a watch to the test. Figure out how much time you have to spend taking the test and what time, on your watch, it will be over. Check your watch periodically during the test to see how you are managing your time (but not so often you distract yourself!).

THE FOLLOWING TEST STRATEGIES APPLY TO MULTIPLE CHOICE TESTS.

4) Once the test begins, do a quick run-through and answer any questions which are easy for you. Skip any that are not. If the answer sheet is a bubble (computer-scored) answer sheet, be sure and put a faint distinctive mark beside the number of each questions you are skipping so that you will leave the appropriate answer place blank for coming back and answering it later. (And once you mark your answer, don't forget to erase the mark.)
5) Do a second run through, skipping the ones you have answered and answering any of the answers which you can answer fairly quickly or can make a fairly good guess. Leave only those questions unanswered for which you have absolutely no idea what the answer might be.

6) Now is a good time to check your watch and see how much time you have left. Up to this point, you should be working quickly but not racing.
7) For the few questions which remain, try to eliminate some of the possible answers given. Do your best to complete these questions in the time you have remaining.
8) If you have any time left over, check over the questions you have answered. Don't agonize over them; it isn't life or death.

THE FOLLOWING STRATEGIES APPLY TO ESSAY EXAMS.

9) The strategy is similar to what you saw above. Answer those questions which are easiest for you first and quickly so that you have adequate time to spend on the ones that are harder. Rather than freeze up, begin to outline any pertinent information you can recall about the question. You may find that you know more than you thought. Remember to answer in complete sentences, to use good grammar, spelling, etc.

THE FOLLOWING STRATEGIES APPLY TO EXAMS FOR WHICH YOU MUST DO CALCULATIONS, RECALL FORMULAS, ETC.

10) The strategy is similar to what you saw above. Answer those questions which are easiest for you first, and quickly, so that you have adequate time to spend on the ones that are harder. Once you come to an impasse on any particular question, go on to something else and return to it later. This will keep you from freezing up and keep those creative juices and your momentum flowing.

FOLLOWING ANY EXAM:

Have something planned for as soon as possible following your exam to do that is fun and constructive. Tell yourself as you are preparing for your exam that this is your reward for a job well done. At moments of anxiety during the test, fast forward in your mind: see yourself engaging in this fun activity, with the test behind you and you feeling good about how you have done.

REMEMBER: TEST WISENESS IS A SKILL LIKE ANY OTHER AND IT IMPROVES GREATLY AS YOU PRACTICE IT MORE AND MORE. ADAPT THESE SUGGESTIONS TO SUIT YOURSELF AND DESIGN YOUR OWN SET OF TEST WISENESS STRATEGIES TO FIT YOUR NEEDS. EAGERLY WATCH AND SEE YOUR PROGRESS OVER TIME. THE DAY WILL COME WHEN YOU COULD BE GIVING OTHERS TIPS ON HOW TO DO WELL ON TESTS.

SESSION TWO

I. Welcome
II. Brief review of information covered in Session One
III. Round in which each member takes a turn reporting on which aspect of test wiseness he or she practiced during the week and how it worked out. Discussion.
IV. Round in which each member provides an example of an anxious belief he or she has about taking tests
V. Mini-lecture on irrational beliefs and positive self-affirmations related to test anxiety
VI. Exercise in which members are broken into dyads and share with a partner their primary anxious thought. Their partner helps them come up with a way to dispute this maladaptive belief and a positive affirmation to substitute in place of the irrational belief.
VII. Members are asked to share what they got from the dyad exercise and to commit to practice their disputation and affirmation during the coming week
VIII. Brief overview of material to be covered in Session Three
IX. Invitation to members to ask final questions or offer comments
X. Adjournment

- Outline for mini-lecture on cognitive restructuring techniques:

1. Recognizing irrational beliefs:
   The three main irrational beliefs identified by Albert Ellis (Ellis & Dryden, 1991) are:
   1) Everything that I do must be done perfectly by me. I should not make any mistakes or have to learn how to do something new. If my work can be criticized, that is truly awful and it means that I am unworthy.
   2) Everyone must like me, respect me, esteem me. This extends to everything I say and do. If someone else does not like me or respect me and what I say and do, it is first of all awful and second of all, it means that either I am totally unworthy or he/she is a total creep or both.
   3) I must always get my way. If I see the need for things to be a certain way and they do not turn out that way, it is awful, I cannot possibly be happy, and it is a tragedy of major social proportions.

Related to at least one of these three irrational beliefs, what are the thoughts you have that are your "worry thoughts" about taking tests? (Leader should write these on the board. This can end up leading to a lively and humorous discussion, which the leader should foster.)
Coming up with disputations for the irrational beliefs:

E.g., if the belief is that if I don't get a perfect score on this test, it means:

1) I will get a bad grade in the entire course
2) I will not be able to go to college, grad school, graduate (whichever applies)
3) I will not be a success in life
4) I will wind up a homeless failure

One can counter this belief by telling himself/herself:

"Just because I make a mistake on this test does not mean that I won't get an OK grade on the test. Just because I don't get an OK grade on the test, my other work in the course could bring up my grade. Other people have gone to college, grad school, etc., even if they did have one or two (or more) bad grades. It's not an absolute disaster if I do not get into my number one choice. Lots of people who make mistakes and even experience failures end up successful. Look at Thomas Edison. He tried over 900 ways to make a light bulb before he found a way to make one that worked."

[The leader will need to be at least a little creative in helping students come up with disputations of their particular irrational beliefs. It helps to read any book on the subject by Albert Ellis. This author recommends *The New Guide to Rational Living* by Albert Ellis and Robert A. Harper, which is not one of the references for this curriculum, but is a basic and easy introduction to the ideas of Rational-Emotive Therapy.]

And after disputing the irrational belief, the student can choose an affirmation to replace it. It should be realistic and confidence-inspiring. In the example shown above, an appropriate affirmation might be something like:

"I am prepared for this test and I am in the process of learning how to do really well on tests. It will be interesting to see how much I improve each and every time I take a test. As for this test, I will apply my new test wiseness strategies and be able to show what I know. Even if I don't make a perfect score on this particular test, I can certainly still be a success in life."

SESSION THREE

I. Welcome
II. Brief review of information covered in Sessions I & II
III. Round in which each member takes a turn reporting on how he or she practiced disputing their primary irrational belief related to test taking and the affirmation they replaced it with and how it worked out. Discussion.
IV. Activity in which members are asked to close their eyes and get in touch with any feelings of tension in their bodies. This will lead into formal teaching for fifteen minutes of systematic relaxation in which from head to feet, members will be asked to clench and relax their muscles.
V. Members are asked to share their experiences of doing systematic relaxation. They are also asked to come up with ways they can borrow a few components from this overall relaxation exercise to be able to relax themselves somewhat in various anxiety-provoking situations.
VI. Members are asked to commit to practicing the full systematic relaxation each night before sleep and to practice their short-cut methods for relaxing in every day life whenever they feel anxious.
VII. Brief overview of material to be covered in Session Four
VIII. Invitation to members to ask final questions or offer comments
IX. Adjournment

- Suggestions for preparing systematic relaxation exercise:

It is suggested that the leader might do well to prepare this ahead of time, write a script, and record the entire thing on an audiocassette tape, to be played during the group meeting. That way, the leader does not have to be nervous, worry about leaving anything out, etc. Group members can be encouraged to use the tape as an example of a similar tape that each can put together for himself/herself. Also, this same tape can be used again and again each time the group leader uses the C^3 curriculum for a group. Finally, the leader himself/herself can also use the tape at bedtime to relax.

In preparing the relaxation exercise, have members start at the top of their heads, clenching the muscles in their foreheads and temples, holding it for several seconds, and then relaxing completely. Then they should go down the face, then to the neck, the shoulders, arms, hands, chest, abdomen, etc., all the way down to the toes. Concentrate especially on those areas where people tend to hold their tension in their bodies: forehead, jaw, neck, shoulders, back, pelvis.

In making the tape (or leading the exercise live), the leader should use a soft, soothing, low tone of voice. After all, the purpose is to help members to relax. Whatever tone of voice you have which you think is most soothing and relaxing to others and puts them most at ease should be the one you use.

SESSION FOUR

I. Welcome
II. Brief review of information covered in Sessions I, II, & III
III. Round in which each member takes a turn reporting on how he or she practiced full systematic relaxation at bedtime and components of systematic relaxation during the day when feeling anxious and how it worked out. Discussion.
IV. Round in which each member talks about the things they hate most about taking tests, getting ready to take the test, etc. These are listed on the board. Members are encouraged to be as dramatic and emphatic as possible in describing the unpleasantness they experience. Their examples are written on the board.
V. Members are asked to suggest ways in which they can turn the unpleasantness around and make things fun. If they cannot think of any, the group leader can give a few examples. Members are encouraged to brainstorm and elaborate on these. Suggestions: having each member make up a funny rhyme or limerick that relates to his or her particular concerns or situation; a special dance each one can do in private (like Mr. Natural from the underground comics of the sixties and his version of walking "big and bad," which he called "trucking," as in the Grateful Dead song); something they can come up with to loosen themselves up and laugh and enjoy the moment.
VI. Summary and review of all material covered in the four sessions
VII. Invitation to members to ask final questions or offer comments
VIII. Adjournment

- Like riding a bicycle, teaching people how to find fun and humor in the situation in which they normally feel anxious is a difficult task to teach if you don't know how to do it for yourself. If you do know how to do it for yourself, then it is something you can help someone else to learn. If not, you may need to get someone else in there to lead this session of the group (and pay attention while they do, because you could learn a valuable and life-changing skill here). Several books by Norman Cousins, who learned to overcome a terminal illness through laughter, are helpful. One is listed in the reference list for this module. Encourage silliness in the midst of seriousness. Being silly doesn't necessarily mean you're not working hard or not aware how important the situation is; but it can mean that you can have fun and be at ease along the way. It is a skill that makes people's lives far more rich, makes them a pleasure to be around, and can (literally) save your life.

Appendix II. Suggested Evaluation Form

[You can ask these questions orally and record the answers or have members fill it out.]

It is suggested that you do not have respondents put their names on the evaluation as you may get more candid feedback that way.

Evaluation of Your Experience with the C^3 Curriculum for Test Mastery

ANSWER AS MANY AS APPLY FOR EACH QUESTION.

1. What things did you learn during these weeks that you found most helpful for you?

a. test taking strategies
b. how to relax my body
c. how to change my irrational beliefs
d. how to have more fun in situations in which I used to worry
e. other

_____

_____

2. What parts of the curriculum were not so useful for you?

a. test taking strategies
b. how to relax my body
c. how to change my irrational beliefs
d. how to have more fun in situations in which I used to worry
e. other

_____

_____

3. What other things did you like about the program?

a. meeting times
b. length of meetings
c. location of meetings
d. the other students I met
e. other

_____

_____

4. What other things did you not like as well about the program?

a. meeting times
b. length of meetings
c. location of meetings
d. the other students I met
e. other

_____

_____

5. What suggestions do you have for ways the program could be made better?

6. Any other comments?

THANKS FOR TAKING THE TIME TO GIVE YOUR OPINIONS.
IT WILL HELP TO MAKE THIS PROGRAM EVEN BETTER IN THE FUTURE.